

KAYANG & ME

This is a powerfully honest story. A story of family, land and identity. At its centre, Kayang Hazel, compassionate, wise and strong. A story to open your heart to.

Sally Morgan

Even before I'd finished *Kayang & Me* I knew the value of it and enjoyed learning and being enriched by both voices. Life stories told in both 'Noongar talk' by Hazel Brown, mixed with the award-winning style of her nephew Kim Scott demonstrate the significant role of oral history in learning about Indigenous Australia and, while presenting a family history, explore not only the complexity but also the evolution of Aboriginal identity and culture nationally.

Anita Heiss

Kim Scott is a descendant of people living along the south coast of Western Australia prior to colonisation, and is proud to be one among those who call themselves Noongar. His writing has won numerous awards and prizes, including two Miles Franklin Literary Awards. Kim's novels include *True Country*, *Benang: from the heart* and *That Deadman Dance*. He is currently Professor of Writing at Curtin University in Western Australia.

Hazel Brown is the senior elder of a large, extended Noongar family. She has worked as a rural labourer, was a member of Western Australia's first Metropolitan Commission of Elders, and is a registered Native Title claimant over part of the south coast of Western Australia.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are respectfully advised that deceased people are referenced in this publication.

KIM SCOTT
HAZEL BROWN

KAYANG
& ME

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For Bob Pirrup Roberts and Fanny Winnery

Wilomin Noongar

I remember when they used to go hunting. Dad used to be late coming back to camp and the boys'd be wondering. I'd say, 'Oh, Pa won't be long.'

They reckoned, 'Oh, Pa mighta got drowned.'

And I'd say, 'No, he'll light a fire directly. When he come over the hill he'll light a fire and he'll show us.' And next thing you see smoke, and then — not long — Dad coming down the slope towards us.

That's how Noongar used to do it. Years ago they used to light fires to let people know where they were, you know.

Grandfather Dongup was bringing cattle up from Hopetoun. He said he saw the smoke those Noongars made, top of the hill, and there musta been a lot of them. They was going for a meeting, exchanging women or something like that I suppose. When he came back, there was no-one.

See, most of 'em travelled from Jerdacuttup, just to go and get killed at Cocanarup.

My name is Hazel Brown. I was born on the ninth of November 1925, at a place called Kendenup. My mother and her first husband, they were working down there. A lot of people used to trap possum you know, for the pelts.

I was born in an old packing shed. Years ago no women had their babies in hospital, you weren't allowed to. They had their babies in the bush.

My mother was Nellie Limestone from Marble Bar; she was born at Lydon station. Her mother was Mary Williams, a full-blood Aboriginal from the Pilbara district. Her father was supposed to have been a white man.

My mother was one of the Stolen Generations. She was sent to the Carrolup Native Settlement — now called Marribank — near Katanning. She was known there as Nellie Limestone, but there were too many Nellites around so they changed her name to Sybil when they made her get married.

She used to run away from there. Jack Cornwall was doing work for a farmer at Boscabel, in the Beaufort River district, and my father was working for him. Jack had a horse and cart, and he used to give the girls a lift to where the men were.

When the white bosses from the settlement went after the young girls they took a black tracker with them, and the policeman in charge of Katanning police station, he went too. Mum and Aunty Anne Morrison were caught, and Dad Yiller and Mum were made to get married. That was in 1920.

My father's name was Freddy Roberts. Yiller was his Aboriginal name. He was born at Jacup, a place between Ravensthorpe and Jerramungup in the Fitzgerald area. He died in Katanning District Hospital in the year 1930, on the thirtieth of November.

My mother had two children by then, and after Fred Yiller died, well me and Lenny were going to be sent to Carrolup Settlement, so Fred Yiller's brother, Fred Tjinjel Roberts, married my mother. That was Noongar way, see. She was accepted into the family, and that meant her husband's brother looked after her when the husband died.

There were three Freds in the family. There was the eldest brother Yiller, and there's Booker, and there's Tjinjel, and they all went by the name of Fred, so there was no one Fred; there was Fred This and Fred That. But my father was Fred Roberts, and that's the name we've been known by, and then I married Harry Brown and that's when I became a Brown.

I spent my early years in the Needilup and Jerramungup districts, and the first language I was taught was Noongar talk. I only ever spoke the language of our people from the south of the state. I was never taught the language of my mother's tribe.

I grew up with my brothers and sister among our father's full-blood relations. When we were young we always kept the laws of our people who were traditional people. We mostly lived in bag camps — you know, like tents made out of old hessian bags and canvas and that — and we slept on rushes or bushes for our beds. We ate the bush food of our people, too.

I was just seven years of age when I was taught to track, snare, hunt and gather food. I was also taught how to use a gun. I shot rabbits, parrots, ducks, and at the age of ten I shot my first kangaroo. My teacher was my father's brother, who became a father to me.

I never had to shoot the possum because I climbed the tree and pulled it out by the legs or tail. We often went hunting for mallee hen nests and if there were eggs in the nest we would

always leave one or two for the mothers to look after.

I was taught about the laws and the traditions of the people of our region by my parents and elders. Our people were mostly kept together by Henry Dongup and Waibong Moses. They and the other old people made my second father marry my mother.

My father's father was called Bob Roberts (also known as Pirrup), and his mother was called Monkey, a woman who came from the Ravensthorpe district. My second father was also the son of Pirrup, and his mother was Emily Mudda Dabb.

Most of my grandmother Monkey's family were massacred some time after 1880 by white people at a place called Cocanarup, a few miles from the Ravensthorpe townsite. Some of Granny Emily's people died there too.

My grandfather Pirrup's father was Bobby Roberts, whose family came from the Hunter River, about five miles from Bremer Bay. Great-grandfather Bobby's mother was of the Wilomin people.

Wilo, that's us. We're Wilomin. A long-legged people. Well, we weren't all long-legged, but that's what they called our people. Like, Lenny had the long skinny legs ... Me, I got the name Yaakiny, 'cause I was the slow one. Turtle, that's me. They would be quick quick while I'm lagging and I'm coming behind ...

*

My name is Kim Scott. Not long-legged at all, I'm following even further behind Aunty Hazel.

My father, Tommy Scott, was the only surviving child to an Aboriginal woman who died when he was ten years old, after which

his Aboriginal grandmother continued to raise him until his Scottish father arranged boarding schools and even a succession of stepmothers. He still occasionally saw his grandmother. Sometimes, too, an aunty or uncle looked after him.

When I was a child my father told me to be proud I was 'of Aboriginal descent'. Perhaps it was the silence surrounding his words that made them resonate as they did; I'd certainly heard no such thing anywhere else in my life, certainly not in my reading or schooling. There didn't seem much in the way of empirical evidence to support my father's words. A child, and unable to either calibrate injustice and racism or identify its cause, I sensed the legacy of oppression.

I remember a young man running to my father for help in escaping a family feud, crying that 'they' were gunna get him and chop his legs off. A baby — one among a series of several entrusted to us by a neighbouring elder while the parents were unable to care for them — died after being accidentally placed in a bath of scalding water soon after returning to his home. Peering through the fly-screen, for the first time I saw my mother sobbing uncontrollably.

Most of Aunty Hazel's writing in this book comes from transcriptions of tape-recordings we did together. That method created some difficult decisions for us, most of which could be reduced to the particular problem of how to capture the distinctive nature of her speech while allowing it to be relatively smooth to read on the page. For example, Aunty Hazel says 'Jerrymungup' or 'Jerry' when she's talking about the place most books and maps label 'Jerramungup'. She'll often articulate 'nineteen hundred and twenty-two', not 'nineteen twenty-two', and she says 'coulda', not 'could've'. Generally, we've chosen the variant more common on the printed page: 1922, not 1900-and-22; Jerramungup, not Jerrymungup.

Authentically reproducing Aunty Hazel's sound in print became

even more of a problem when she used Noongar language. Partly that's because the English alphabet doesn't do justice to the sounds of Noongar, but also because we've used the spelling and orthography recommended by the Noongar Language and Cultural Centre's 1992 dictionary, and this doesn't fit the south-east dialect as well as it might. The sounds represented by the letters 'b' and 'd' are much more like 'p' and 't', for instance, and there's a greater frequency of middle diphthongs and relatively few vowels at the end of words; the word for water, for instance, is more like 'ka-ip', in contrast to what is usually written as 'kep', or 'kepa' in other dialects.

Mostly, we've opted for compromise in the interests of communicating more widely. We've used very little Noongar language in this book anyway, not only for the above reasons, but because it's a language that's best transmitted orally. You need to listen.

A further problem with putting speech into writing arose when we looked at transcripts of interviews with Aunty Hazel conducted more than twenty years ago, in which she used expressions like 'people of colour' or 'coloured people' more often than the terms 'Noongar' or 'Aboriginal', and makes a distinction between 'half-castes' and 'full-bloods'.

When I read those terms it made me think about how the language we use, and the ways of thinking it encourages, can change over even a relatively short time. I wondered if something of that distinction between 'half-caste' and 'full-blood' was implicit in my father's words when he said 'Aboriginal descent', and whether it also existed in my own thinking as a child. I know I identified with those Aboriginal people who were achieving in the society I knew and felt a part of: the boxer, Lionel Rose, who also recorded country and western songs; Jimmy Little, the musician; a range of Australian Rules footballers like Sydney Jackson, Polly Farmer and Barry Cable.

I gravitated to what I thought might be the literature of 'coloured people', and naively read Kipling's *Kim*, devouring it without being conscious of the identity confusion of its protagonist and the strange cultural appropriation taking place. I remember my father reading a series of novels in a sub-genre typified by one titled *Mandingo*, and although I don't recall ever seeing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* it's plausible that my father — since I, in my innocence, could identify with Kipling's Kim — may even have felt an affinity with Uncle Tom. Well, he may have been an uncle to some, but he was father to me.

I also remember, not long before he died, seeing a copy of *Poor Fellow My Country* opened beside my father's empty chair. I'd guess my father could identify with Prindy, but where was the tribal elder to guide him?

My father and I didn't have a lot of conversations, which is probably why I remember those we did have, like when — at six or seven years old — I came home bruised and bleeding and cursing two other Noongar boys — strangers — I'd clashed with after they'd stolen my younger brother's bicycle. 'Coons,' I was calling them.

My father shut me up. Don't talk that way, he said. People are people. And for the first time he told me to be proud I was 'of Aboriginal descent'.

Perhaps my father's words resonated so strangely simply because, in 1960s south-western Australia, it was hard to articulate pride in Aboriginality. My father wanted me to have something more like a faith, a psychological conviction. It was not something easily put into words. He said to be proud, that was the important thing, but he lacked the vocabulary, didn't have the right stories at hand. It's a continuing problem I think, this struggle to articulate the significance and energy of a specific Indigenous heritage.

In the mid 1960s it was put to me in terms of being proud to be 'of Aboriginal descent' and 'part-Aboriginal', but not much more than ten years later I was a young adult living and working among Aboriginal people of south-western Australia — Noongars — who repeatedly said, 'You can't be bit and bit. What are you, Noongar or wadjela?'

It was a political imperative about the need to commit, to align oneself with either white or black, and I felt compelled to obey. There didn't seem to be any choice, not if I wished to be among Noongars. But even as I winced at the phrase 'Aboriginal descent' and learned more of our shared history, our story of colonisation, I was not always confident of my acceptance by other Noongars.

My father died in his thirties. Young as he was, he was several years older than his mother had been at the time of her death.

I didn't grow up in the bush. There was no traditional upbringing of stories around the camp fire, no earnest transmission of cultural values. The floor of the first house I remember was only partially completed, and my three siblings and I, pretending we were tight-rope walkers, balanced on the floor-joists spanning the soft dirt and rubble half a metre below us.

We moved to a government house on a bitumen street with gutters running down each side, and even though the street came to an end, the slope ran on and on through patchy scrub and past the superphosphate factory, the rubbish tip, the Native Reserve.

Individuals were fined for being on the reserve, and fined for being in town. Their crime was being non-Aboriginal in the one place and Aboriginal in the other, after legislation was refined in the attempt to snare those who — as the frustrated bureaucrat put it — 'run with the hares and hunt with the hounds' and to trip them as they moved to and fro across a dividing legislative line.

My father was mobile that way, always moving.

From the city where he'd reached adulthood, he moved back close to the country of our Noongar ancestors, and worked on the roads as 'leading hand' in a gang of mainly Aboriginal men. Returning home after being away from us for ten days of every fortnight, he usually took us camping. He wanted to be a professional fisherman, and we rattled along the coast in a battered 4WD and trailed nets from a dinghy in the country of our countless ancestors, 'going home' together. We kids helped with the nets, cleaned fish, and even hawked them around the neighbourhood. My mother broke up blocks of ice with the back of an axe, and we carefully layered fish and ice into crates which my father then loaded onto a train bound for the city.

One among other Noongar and wadjela children running barefoot in a suburb a skip, hop and a step from the reserve, I was only ever at the fringe of a community which showed all the signs of being under siege.

I knew my father's mother and grandmother had lived around Ravensthorpe and Hopetoun, two very small towns in the very south of Western Australia. Hopetoun, on the coast, was the port for Ravensthorpe, some fifty kilometres inland, and were it not for an explosion of mining which began in the very late nineteenth century and lasted a decade or so into the twentieth, it would probably never have existed. Hopetoun is a little too exposed for a port; the sealers and whalers and ships of the colonists mostly preferred bays either side of it for the shelter they provide from the persistent southerly winds which chop and toss the sea onto the white beach. As Ravensthorpe and its mines dwindled, so too did Hopetoun.

I was born in the capital city of the state, far away and about sixty years after the proclamation of those southern towns, and returned to Albany, the largest town on the south coast, to do my schooling

before moving away again for further education. When I began teaching and working among Noongar people, I only met one or two who knew my grandmother's name. The few who remembered my dad didn't know his family.

Some of my father's relatives were visibly Aboriginal, but lived apart from the wider Noongar community. It was awkward to ask certain questions of them. One such uncle insisted that his mother and her forebears were not from the south-west but, 'South Australia, she was from South Australia.'

So I knew very few members of my extended Indigenous family, and they were either ashamed to admit to their Aboriginality, or — like my father had perhaps been — too diffident to loudly identify themselves as Aboriginal. Maybe they thought the real Aboriginal people were the down-and-outs, the losers. They might have had mostly negative understandings of what it was to be Aboriginal, and less sense of kinship with the local Indigenous community than even I had, courtesy of my father and people we knew.

Clearly, I had very few close relations who identified themselves and were accepted as Noongar. We must originally be from some place else I thought, and not from around those tiny towns of Hopetoun and Ravensthorpe.

Names plucked from a family tree and the knowledge that my father had attended a particular mission school led me to a remote Aboriginal community with which the mission was associated. I applied to be a teacher at the government school there, hoping to connect with Indigenous family with roots in country and community.

I was not successful. The name was coincidental, but the disappointment of not finding the country or people I came from fed my first novel, which I wrote with the lyrics of Midnight Oil's

'Dead Heart' stuck to the wall beside my desk. The chorus of that song is defiant — how we carry the true country in our hearts, and how our ancestry cannot be broken — but I think the novel emerged from the chasm between the affirmation of those lyrics and the title's sorry tale of loss. 'True country' indeed.

Some years later, co-ordinating an Aboriginal bridging course at a local university, I wanted to run the annual 'cultural field trip' in Noongar country, led by Noongar people. Many of the students weren't happy with this, since the alternative was a trip to exotic and warmer destinations, and most thought that there was only 'oppression culture' left in Noongar country — not 'high' culture, not creation stories, language and songs. I worried they were right, but believed that such a course of study in south-western Australia had to acknowledge the primacy of Noongar people and culture. I heard of a family group needing to test the logistics of a 'cultural tourism' enterprise they were developing, and volunteered our group as their clients.

We were not to know it but our guide and elder, Mr Ralph Winmar, was in the last year of his life, and so we were among a privileged few to be properly introduced to the intimacies of his home country, and welcomed with the songs and language of its ancestral spirits.

He sent a group of us to climb the rocky side of that creative spirit, the Waakal — or at least that transformed remnant of it fenced within a small rectangle of the wheat belt somewhere around Quairading and York. On the climb we tasted water running from the wound left by an ancestral Noongar's spear and, standing high on the Waakal's fossilised back, looked out over a tractor describing small futile circles in the paddock below us, and heard the bleating of distant tiny sheep. The breeze in our faces, and the air entering our lungs did not — despite the cleared paddocks and the

fences and sheep and tractor — belong to any place known only as 'the wheat belt'.

It seemed true; an old spirit rests in the land and we, its people, are the catalyst of its awakening. It's a potential, a possibility, that still excites me.

I mentioned to one of the elders accompanying us that my Aboriginal family had lived in Ravensthorpe. She said, 'Oh, I hope not, for your sake.' I didn't know what she meant. Someone else suggested I go see Aunty Hazel. They reckoned Hazel Brown knew everyone who'd lived around Ravensthorpe.

Aunty Hazel's genealogical knowledge almost failed her the first time I rang, and back then I didn't realise how rare this was. With only the sound of my voice over the telephone, my surname, and a rough idea of where my family had lived, she nevertheless named my Scottish grandfather's brother and a Noongar woman *he'd* partnered. 'You must be their grandson,' she said.

'No ...'

'Tommy Scott; was he your father then?' she asked.

When I came to visit she held her arms out to me. Small and wiry, she's quite fair-skinned. We had those characteristics in common, anyway. Two fair-skinned and sinewy people, embracing.

People are happy to say of each of us that, well, walking down the street, you wouldn't know ... They look like a wadjela, you wouldn't know they were a Noongar.

Wadjela Noongar was the term Aunty Hazel used when she explained, rather than introduced me, to one of her adult grandchildren. Whiteman Noongar: it's a phrase with subtle increments of meaning which range, depending on tone and context, all the way from 'one of us' to 'one of them'.

Aunty Hazel knew of my youngest brother through her son and

grandson. And yes, of course, she remembered my father: Him and her man Harry Brown used to drink and chase women together. Grinning wryly, she said they thought they were a couple of deadly *bandji* men — meaning sexually promiscuous.

Your father was my cousin, she told me. She remembered him bragging about his Aboriginal relations when he was drinking with a lot of people camping with her family in Borden. Aunty Hazel said he used to be at their camp all the time when he was working on the roads out that way, not long after he'd moved back from the city. When she asked her father Fred Roberts — Pa Tjinjel — who this man's family was, Pa Tjinjel said, 'He's our people, but wait for him to ask.'

My father never did. Too proud, maybe. I think I understand how he wanted others to claim and embrace him. He thought it was enough to have known his grandmother, some uncles and aunts, to have a general awareness of cousins. Perhaps he didn't want to humble himself — or risk rejection. I understand that. He was drinking, he was bragging.

Of course, in other situations it wasn't wise to boast about Noongar family, or even mix with them. It was a crime, and no-one would choose to have the law applied to them the way it did to Noongar people back then.

Aunty Hazel remembers my fair-skinned father among Noongars even though, like herself, he would have been able to move in white society in a way that other Noongars could not, and I guess that gave him an advantage. It's something Aunty Hazel and her brother Uncle Lomas talk about: the difference between being a Noongar with white skin and one with black skin. Not because of anything inherent, but because people treat you according to the degree to which you are recognisably 'Aboriginal'. That was true in the past, and still is.

Why didn't Pa Tjinjel offer the information? I guess because being asked was an acknowledgement of his authority, and a way of paying respect to him. He probably knew fair-skinned Noongars who'd turned their backs on their families and accepted the imperatives of white law.

Aunty Hazel seemed pleased I'd come to her now.

I'd visit, and she'd be raking the dry yard of her suburban government house, or hanging out laundry, or solving some family problem. For most of the time we spent on this manuscript two of her adult grandchildren — Milana and Clinton — lived with her. Both are schizophrenics. There were great-grandchildren in the house too, including little Brayton, whose frail heart was expected to sustain him for only a few years more.

When Aunty Hazel was seventy-five years old she heard that a grand-daughter, Lindley, had left her violent partner and was in a hospital in New South Wales, and that welfare had taken the children. Aunty Hazel organised funding and flew across the continent to bring mother and children back, even though it meant more people to care for in her little home.

An adult nephew, Buddy, injured in a collision between a truck and his motorcycle, was in her care for the last twenty-four years of his life. His was one of the first Noongar funerals I attended as family and, even then, I had to be introduced to almost everyone.

I remember suggesting to Aunty Hazel that she record the sorts of things she knew — the genealogies, the language, the sites and stories and history.

'Go on then,' she said.

I think she was enjoying some of the attention *Benang* was receiving, and especially the gossip about whose family I belonged to.

Recounting her recent visit to an office of Indigenous bureaucracy she suddenly said, 'You know, some of them there don't reckon you're Noongar,' and burst into laughter. I was taken by surprise, and couldn't see that it was something to laugh about. She continued leafing through the pages of a transcript I'd returned to her and then suddenly looked up and asked if I thought we could make a book together.

'We can try,' I said.

I'd often wedge a tape-recorder between us wherever we sat; it might be in the living room among various heaps of fresh laundry, an electric bar heater glowing in the winter gloom. Other times we sat out in the sun on a bush-timber bench her son Eric had built. There were nearly always children about, and on the tapes their conversation and games often accompany our voices.

Sometimes, other visitors looked at me twice, clearly thinking 'Who? Wadjela?' but once I was introduced the tension dissipated.

Aunty Hazel is quite deaf, and I'd have to shout to be heard. Even then she closely watched my face as I spoke. So mostly I'd listen, nod, gesture. Sometimes we'd study notes I'd written up, diagrams and drawings, photographs and bits of books. Occasionally, someone listening would want to join in.

What did she want to talk about? Transcribing her voice, I noticed there were only passing references to things which are ordinarily regarded as momentous in an individual's life: cancer; a nervous breakdown, the time her lung haemorrhaged as she stepped from the train after having spent months away so that she only had time to kiss the family before returning to the hospital.

It wasn't these things she wanted to talk about.

Her grandson Ryan Brown told me how she had once called him over to her when he was whingeing about something or other and, lifting the edge of her shirt, told him to feel the side of her chest. His

hand entered a gaping hole in her ribcage where her ribs had been removed. Cancer. Decades ago.

Get over it, she was saying. No point feeling sorry for yourself.

What did she want to talk about?

We looked at photographs, leafed through old 'Native Welfare' files, and I remember her turning away in disappointment and disgust at the record of my ancestor, Harriette Coleman, telling the police she was 'quarter-caste' not 'half-caste'. No self-respecting Noongar would ever do such a thing, so they say, and I felt ashamed of her lie. But now, knowing her audience and the consequences of being classified as 'Aboriginal' at that time, I understand the old lady's words.

It's the sort of behaviour that makes Aunt Hazel angry, but she reacted very differently to some ancestral Noongar names I'd fished from the archives. I offered, 'Wongin, or was it Wonyin?' Aunt Hazel sat up straight. 'Pinyan' gave her another injection of energy. And when I said, 'Winnery. Fanny Winnery,' she laughed out loud, and exclaimed, 'Granny Winnery!'

'Winnery,' she said, 'that's a Hunter River name. That's from the head of the Hunter River. Wilomin people.'

*

Old great-great-grandmother's old father used to shout like a curlew, and disguise himself to look like a curlew. And that's why that family called themselves Wilomin. Wilo, that means curlew, see? And actually they're a very shy bird. You'll hear them, but you'll very seldom see 'em. Unless you're very quiet. Very, very quiet.

Wilo, they got long legs, and there's only a bit of a bird on top, and they have this long neck, and they can flatten themselves down just like a piece of dry stick and they'll never